

All languages dance the same dance.

Ethnographers and anthropologists have entertained us with amusing stories of quaint cultural practices. They are real, no doubt, as real as the differences between languages. For instance, we are interested in the rites, simple or elaborate, developed in many of the world's cultures, to predict the future. Ways, basically, of asking the gods. As we marvel at these strikingly different practices and beliefs we ignore what is common to them. I mean of course, the apparently universal human need to see into the future, to decipher what is ahead of us, what is to come, in order to help us make the right decisions. We tend to overlook that there is a common ground here, same as we overlook the core concepts behind the various expressive devices of different languages. All languages have evolved ways of stating, negating, asking for information, they have developed means of expressing ideas such as possession, location in place and time, amount, agent or doer, instrument, possibility, causality etc. etc. By the time they go to school, children have heard thousands of if-clauses, so popular with parents. So they know quite a lot about setting conditions and negotiating them. Or watch a mother and a child with a picture book: And where's the girl who... Can you see the car which... Relative clauses over and over again, used to identify people and things. Okay, not all languages have relative clauses, but they certainly have ways of clearly identifying persons and objects in speech. And because of these core concepts common to all languages, because of this unity in diversity we can map languages onto each other, no matter how differently they express these ideas. So we can make correspondences, and we can mirror the foreign construction in the familiar idiom. In the final analysis, the perspectival flexibility of a naturally acquired language to clarify the form-meaning constructions of a foreign language is without equal. Only an acquired language is rich, nuanced and supple enough to explain another language, to capture its fleeting dynamism that often defies analytic categories. That's why we need a new methodology for foreign language teaching where FL and MT enter into a powerful alliance. The book by Butzkamm & Caldwell on the bilingual reform is about this new methodology, its theory and practice. If teachers can handle sophisticated bilingual techniques alongside monolingual techniques, of course, FLT can make a huge step forward.